

# Are Greek historians biased in their presentation of the enemy?

Pranav Sood

The opening of Herodotus' *The Histories*, the famous phrase, 'that the great and marvellous deeds – some displayed by Greeks, some by barbarians – may not be without their glory', is certainly suggestive of impartiality towards the enemy. This is because of the sense of equality implied by the repetition of 'some', which suggests that barbarians are just as capable of great deeds as Greeks. The case of Artemisia, as described in 7.99 and 8.81, provides some evidence for this argument, with Xerxes' famous phrase in Book VIII, 'My men have turned into women, my women into men', in conjunction with the historian's own view of Artemisia's 'spirit of adventure and manly courage', serving as an indication of Herodotus' willingness to praise enemy valour. This is a clear-cut example of what H. J. Rose called 'Herodotus' warm hard reverence for noble conduct above all else'.

## Respect for the Other

Although Books two and four, the two main ethnographic excursions in *The Histories*, telling of the Egyptians and Scythians respectively, do not strictly deal with the 'enemy' in the Persian Wars, Herodotus' presentation of the customs of these nations is an important consideration in any analysis of his presentation of the Other. In Book two, for instance, the ethnographic study of the Scythians, Herodotus paints a wholly different, though admittedly ambiguous, picture of the Other. In 4.2, Herodotus describes the frankly barbaric process of milking mares and the practice of blinding slaves. One interpretation of Herodotus' tone in this passage is that it is sarcastic and almost patronizing, serving to indicate Herodotus' pro-Greek bias. This might particularly be the case with the words 'according to them', which, by their diction, could suggest that the 'barbarian' conception of the science involved in the milking process is somehow fallacious, as compared to the Greek conception thereof.

Alternatively, however, this phrase could simply serve as an acknowledgement of a different (i.e. a non-Greek) way of doing things. Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that this might be the case – for instance, later on in 4.26, Herodotus, rather than castigate the Scythians' customs, instead draws parallels between them and those of the Greeks, stating that the Scythian practice of preserving the head of a father is 'just as the Greeks observe ancestral commemoration'. This is not an isolated occurrence in the text – in Book 2.43, which refers to the Egyptians' religious customs, Herodotus even goes so far as to suggest that the Greeks 'took' the God Heracles from the Egyptian religious tradition. Herodotus' treatment of the Persian customs in 1.131–145 is also a useful, though not conclusive, comparison to make here. In this passage, Herodotus points out similarities as well as differences between customs of the Greeks and the Persians – the practice of 'commerce with boys' features in both races, while the Persians do not 'account the Gods to be in the image of men', as 'the Hellenes' do. Moreover, the passage is almost free of subjective judgements – nowhere does Herodotus openly condemn the customs of the Persians, instead excusing their apparent barbarity with phrases like 'as is their wont'. Thus, there is at least some evidence to suggest that

Herodotus was not biased in his treatment of the enemy. Paul Cartledge echoes this opinion, describing Herodotus' attitude towards non-Greeks as 'hugely untypical'.

## Barbarian tyranny

However, to make this assumption would be to ignore the principal underlying theme of *The Histories*, that is to say, the conflict between Greece and Persia, or as H. J. Rose put it, 'the struggle between East and West'. In Herodotus' narrative, the conflict is not only a war between two nations, but is also depicted as a battle between freedom and tyranny. In 7.101, Demaratus, a medized ex-King of Sparta, presents to Xerxes a system of beliefs so alien that they are met with nothing but contemptuous laughter. For the Persian monarch, in Herodotus' eyes, nothing can seem less logical than the rule of law and the lengths to which the Spartans would be prepared to go in defence of their own freedom. Thus, Herodotus strikes a double blow – not only is the Persian king shown to be an Other, the personification of all that is not 'Greek', but he is also shown to be an arrogant despot, whose belief in his own absolute power overrides any consideration of democracy.

This sort of presentation of the Persian monarch is not an isolated occurrence in the text – for instance, in the constitutional debate in 3.79–83, the characters of Otanes and Megabyzus represent Herodotus' own view of monarchy. Certainly, many of Otanes' arguments prefigure the events that happen later on in the text. For instance, the quotation 'excessive wealth and power... lead to acts of savage and unnatural violence' seems to foreshadow almost perfectly the events of 7.38–40, in which Xerxes' grave anger results in the violent death of Pythius' eldest son and the macabre act of commanding his army to march 'between the severed halves of the young man's body'. Moreover, Otanes' suggestion that 'the typical vices of a monarch...envy and pride... lead to the delusion that he is something more than a man' also corresponds almost perfectly to Xerxes' actions in book seven. For instance, Herodotus' description of Xerxes' famed encounter with the Hellespont, which the Persian King apparently refers to as 'a salt and bitter stream' and orders that it should receive 'three hundred lashes and a pair of fetters', clearly depicts the monarch as being firmly in the grip of hybris. Furthermore, in 7.56–8, Xerxes is reported to have rejected two ill omens, thus solidifying any suggestions of folly, tyrannical hybris, and impiety against him by also seemingly proclaiming himself a higher authority than divine portents. It is my view that the correlation between Otanes' speech and Xerxes' despotic actions in book seven is somehow too complete, the depiction of Xerxes' character altogether too negative for there to be a convincing argument that Herodotus was unbiased in his treatment of the Persian monarch.

*Pranav Sood is an AS level Latin student at King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford, Essex. This is an extract from his Gladstone prize-winning essay.*